ABSTRACT
        A study analyzed electronic-mail requests from
college students (n=34 native speakers of English/NSs, 65 non-native
speakers/NNSs) to faculty, randomly gathered over the period of a
year. The requests were analyzed for the affective response they
produced both on the faculty recipient and on a non-recipient faculty
member, and for linguistic forms used, including mitigators, for
degree of imposition on the faculty member, and for content,
including references to time frames. Results indicate that requests
that had a negative affect generally demonstrated a different
interpretation of the rights and obligations of the parties involved
than positive-affect requests: negative-affect requests frequently
assumed a greater obligation to comply by the faculty than the
faculty member assumed. Requests with positive impact in general also
differed formally from those with negative impact. Differences also
appeared in the messages' content, especially in acknowledgement of
the degree of imposition to the addressee, in the manner and
presentation of time constraints related to the request, and in
explanations for the requests. NNSs used fewer downgraders in their
requests with negative impact, used personal time needs more often,
and acknowledged imposition on the faculty members less often than
NSs. (MSE)

"AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE:"
A STUDY OF WRITTEN STUDENT REQUESTS TO FACULTY

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2

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This paper analyzes e-mail requests from students to faculty. The requests were evaluated by the faculty for their positive or negative affect on the addressee. The analysis showed that those requests which had negative affect generally demonstrated a different interpretation of the rights and obligations of the parties involved than the positive affect requests: the negative affect requests frequently assumed a greater obligation to comply by the faculty member than did the faculty member. In addition, those requests with positive impact in general differed formally from those with negative impact. Differences also appeared in the content of the messages, especially in acknowledgements of the degree of imposition to the addresses, in the manner of presentation of time constraints related to the request, and in explanations for the requests. NSs and NNSs differed formally in that the NNSs used fewer downgraders in their requests with negative impact. In content, the NNSs used personal time needs more often than NSs, and acknowledged the imposition of the request on the faculty less often than the NSs.

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at requests of native and NNSs of English in natural data: actual written requests from students to faculty. While there exists a fairly extensive literature on requests, including cross-cultural and interlanguage data (Beebe, et al, 1990; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989, inter alia), little work has been done on requests in institutional settings. In the present paper, we discuss such requests in keeping with our previous work on institutional language, where institutional roles and status play a part in determining the appropriate forms of language. All of the requests are from lower-status addressors (students) to higher-status addressees (faculty), and they involve topics related to the academic context in which these participants interact (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990). Although the requests are generally institutionally sanctioned, they still constitute face threatening acts (FTAs), because they attempt to get the faculty member to do something he or she might not otherwise do (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Moreover, although in most cases the requests investigated in this paper were within the students' rights to make, and so in that sense do not put them out-of-status, it is not necessarily true that the faculty member has the obligation to comply (Blum- Kulka & House, 1989, p. 146.) Thus, in making such requests students risk their own positive face and the faculty's negative face. Since the faculty have institutional power to act in ways that can seriously affect students' lives, it is in the best interest of the students to assure that the faculty have positive assessments of them. By performing an act which imposes on the faculty, they may put themselves in some jeopardy. As a result, students must be able to judge the degree of imposition of such requests, to take into account the rights and obligations of the parties involved, and to choose the most effective ways to

influence the faculty's behavior in the formulation of the request while addressing the face needs of the parties involved.

METHOD

E-mail requests to the two authors from both native and nonnative graduate students were randomly collected over a period of a year for a total of 34 NS and 65 NNS requests. The requests were then judged based on the affective response they produced from the faculty recipient. They were then also judged in the same way by the other, nonrecipient author. As a result, the messages were divided into two categories: those which triggered some negative affect (Negative Affect Requests, or NAR) and those which did not (Positive Affect Requests, or PAR). The former, NAR, were often judged by the authors to be rude, or inappropriate, perhaps producing some desire not to fulfill the request.[1] Interestingly, the authors agreed 100% on the categorization of the messages.

The requests were analyzed for linguistic forms employed, including the use of mitigators. They were also analyzed for degree of imposition. Finally, they were analyzed according to content, including references to time frames involved, acknowledgment of cost or imposition to faculty, and content of grounders or explanations. Because all of the requests were made through written communication with no potential for face-to-face strategies, they all employed direct or conventionally indirect strategies rather than nonconventionally indirect (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, p. 4 and p. 19). As a result, level of directness is not addressed in this paper.

In order to determine degree of imposition, a questionnaire was devised which listed the most common topics, or goals, of the requests found in the messages. Eight faculty members in the Indiana University Department of Linguistics and Program in Applied Linguistics rated the degree of imposition of each topic. This served as a check on the original categorization of level of imposition by the authors.

RESULTS

Linguistic Forms

By linguistic forms we mean the syntactic frame used by the writer to realize the request. Such forms include I want to, I'd like to, Please+imperative, and statements using appreciate. Some differences in the use of linguistic forms may be found between the PAR and NAR categories and between NSs and NNSs (Table 1). In general, the NSs and NNSs do not differ greatly in the range of linguistic forms used, although the PAR requests by both groups show a different distribution of forms than the NAR requests.

4

(10) Subj: About my oral defense
Hello. How are you? I would like to have my oral defense on the 25th of Aug. When I talked to you before, you said that you would be in town in the week of 24th, Aug. So I assume that this day would be fine for you. I have not decided on the exact time (morning or afternoon). If you have other schedule, please tell me. Also, please tell me whether or not this date "Aug, 25th" is OK to you. Thank you very much, Name. (NNS-, Japanese)

What makes Example (7) PAR is not any difference in the linguistic form from the NAR examples, but the inclusion on the part of the writer of an acknowledgement of the imposition on the faculty member and of the faculty's time. These factors will be discussed in detail later. (Notice also that in these examples, it is not a matter of Speaker (Writer)/Hearer (Reader) orientation. Each of the requests in Examples (7-10) is Hearer oriented.) NAR requests utilizing Please+Imperative, like the NAR Want requests, assume a higher level of obligation to comply by the student than by the faculty member. While Please indicates some faint possibility that the request might not be granted, it does not serve as a strong enough mitigator to soften the force of the Imperative. Students do not have the institutional status to issue Directives to faculty, and the use of this form puts them seriously out-of-status. As we have noted in our other work (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990), such noncongruent acts in institutional talk require a fairly high level of mitigation which is not found in the NAR examples.

Finally, PAR requests from both NSs and NNSs utilize a variety of linguistic forms for which no pattern could be discerned: this is represented in the "Other" category where 71.6% of the NNS requests fall. These include using Query Preparatory requests which include "wonder" statements as in Examples (11) and (12).

(11) Subj: L522 Incomplete Paper
Prof. [Last Name]
I understand this is the busiest time of the semester, but I was wondering if you had a chance to look at my L522 incomplete paper, since you'll be on sabbatical soon? ... [NNS+, Taiwanese]

(12) I was wondering whether it would be possible for me to go to see you at your office anytime this week? ...[NNS+, Thai]

Query preparatory Yes/no and Information Questions are also frequently used as we see in Example (13).

(13) I would like to make an appointment with you. Would you please tell me when you are available and what I should bring? [NNS+, Taiwanese]

Downgraders

The use of downgraders was fairly consistent for NSs in both PAR and NAR requests (Table 2). The general category of downgraders includes both the use of syntactic downgraders such as interrogatives, conditionals, tense, and aspect, as well as the use of

lexical and phrasal downgraders such as politeness markers (please, do you think), hedges, downtoners and cajolers (see Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). NNS PAR requests were comparable. Only the NNS NAR requests were noticeably different. As Table 2 illustrates, NS PAR and NAR and NNS PAR requests all utilize about 1.5 downgraders per request. Example (5) above illustrates a PAR message with a high number of downgraders, including the use of a conditional (if you could), aspect (I'm asking), and a subjectivizer (I guess), as well as an apology. However, NNS NAR requests use on average less than one politeness marker per request at .89 markers per request. Examples (8), (2), and (4), discussed previously, also illustrate NNS requests with minimal use of downgraders.

Table 2: Distribution of Downgraders per Request

NS PAR	1.62	NS NAR	1.54
NNS PAR	1.57	NNS NAR	0.89

We see, then, that although we do find some quantitative differences in the use of linguistic forms and downgraders which might help account for why some requests were perceived as better than others, these differences are primarily relative, not absolute. With the exception the complete lack of Appreciate in the NNS NAR requests, we cannot predict that the presence or absence per se of particular forms results in a request evaluated as PAR or NAR. With this in mind, we turn to an analysis of level of imposition and of content.

Level of Imposition

The possibility arises that the categories of PAR and NAR might actually reflect messages that differed only in their levels of imposition. In order to determine these levels, eight faculty members were asked to rank the topics of the requests found in the data. Examples of what were ranked Low imposition requests are those asking for routine information, asking for appointments which do not require any preparation on the part of the faculty, requesting bibliographic references, borrowing books, and writing short memos. Those which were ranked as High imposition include requests which ask for bending rules in some way, such as asking for Incomplete grades or to accept a late paper, asking for appointments which require extra work on the part of the faculty member, or which intrude on the faculty member's time, such as reading dissertation chapters during a sabbatical or defending a dissertation during summer break. As Table 3 indicates, for NS requesters, it is not the case that Low and High imposition correlate with PAR and NAR requests. Low and High levels of imposition are found in both the PAR and NAR categories at about the same ratio, so it doesn't appear that this factor strongly affects the evaluation of the requests of NSs. It appears, however, that level of imposition may play a role in evaluation of NNS requests. We can see that High Imposition NNS NAR requests are almost twice as frequent (64%) as their Low Imposition NAR requests (36%) (Table 3).

6

Table 3: Distribution of High/Low Imposition Requests by Rating

	NNS PAR	NNS NAR
High	44%	64%
Low	56%	36%

	NS PAR	NS NAR
High	53%	50%
Low	47%	50%

However, it doesn't seem likely that it is imposition alone which determines whether the request will be positively or negatively evaluated by the faculty member. Rather, it is the manner in which the request is formulated. As we saw in Table 2, NNS also used fewer mitigators in their NAR requests: thus NNS High imposition requests are more likely to be accompanied by fewer downgraders. This, however, cannot account for the evaluation of the NS data. As a result, we turn to an analysis of content.

Content

Three major Content categories are related to the evaluation of a request. They are 1) Time 2) Acknowledgement of Imposition; and 3) the proferred Explanation for the request.

Time. Many of the requests, especially the high imposition ones, involve commitments of time on the part of the faculty member. Since time is a precious commodity to faculty, and thus impingements upon it are impingements on negative face, we analyzed the requests in terms of whether and in what manner issues of time were dealt with by the students.

Table 4: Distribution of References to Time by Rating

	NNS PAR	NNS NAR	NS PAR	NS NAR
My Time (Student's)	5.5%	34.6%	4.8%	0%
Flexible Time Frame	16.6%	53.7% (40% = ASAP)	23.8%	36.3%
Your Time (Faculty's)	33.3%	3.8%	14.3%	9.1%
No Mention	44.4%	7.6%	57.1%	54.6%

Table 4 shows that both the NS and NNS PAR requests employed similar strategies in dealing with time: either they did not mention it at all ("No Mention"), which allows total determination of the frame by the faculty member, or they specifically leave time considerations to the faculty member's discretion ("Your Time"). The latter constitutes either a direct or indirect acknowledgement of the imposition of the request, thus minimizing it to some degree.

Examples (14) through (17) illustrate requests where the time frame was explicitly left to the faculty member.

(14) when you are less busy [NNS+, Japanese]
(15) when you are available [NNS+, Taiwanese]
(16) Please let me know what is the best time for you [NNS+, Mandarin]
(17) I could pick it up whenever it's convenient for you. [NS+]

Occasionally in PAR requests, students did specify times, but they were quite flexible or reasonable time frames (Table 4, "Time Frames") which offered leeway and therefore negotiation on the part of the faculty, or were institutionally accurate in terms of judging the actual time likely needed to comply. We can see instances of these time frames in Examples (18) through (20).

(18) anytime this week ...[NNS+, Thai]
(19) Would some time in the next week or two be okay with you? [NS+]
(20) ...I'm planning on being in Btn [Bloomington] from about the 14th to the 20th of December and would like to get together to talk about the diss [NS+]

The mentions of time in the NAR requests, on the other hand, show different strategies. In these requests, NSs and NNSs seldom explicitly leave the time totally up to the faculty. NSs only do so 3.8% of the time compared to 33.3% in their PAR requests. NNS NAR requests leave it up to the faculty only 9.1% of the time compared to 14.3% in their PAR requests. NS NAR requests fail to mention time about as frequently as their PAR requests (54.5% vs 57.1%). When they do mention time, they mention flexible time more often than in their PAR requests (23.8% vs 36.3%). However, these time frames tend to be less realistic than those in their PAR requests. In this regard NAR NNS requests, however, look strikingly different from NS NAR requests and from PAR NNS requests. In NNS NAR requests there is a considerable rise (from 5.5% to 34.6%) in student imposed, nonnegotiable times (Table 4, "My Time"), seen in Examples (21) and (22).

(21) I hesitate to ask you this, but can I receive your comments on chapter 1 and 2 before I leave for Japan? [NNS-, Japanese]

(22) But isn't there any way that you can give me a chance to defend before the semester begins, that is before Aug. 30? [NNS-, Japanese]

Finally, both PAR and NAR messages may refer to Institutional time frames. Example (23) shows a successful use of an appeal to institutional time, where the student mentions the date, but couches it as a reminder.

8

(23) I just would like to remind you that October 15 is the deadline for...I just would like to make sure that the Department of [ ] receives it by the deadline. [NNS+, Spanish]

However, in Example (24), evaluated as NAR, the student adds her own deadline along with that of the institution.

(24) Faculty First Name,
I finally made up my mind to apply for two jobs which have deadlines of Nov. 10. My placement file is not yet complete, however...so I put 2 stamped, addressed envelopes in your box for letters of recommendation. If you could print out 2 extra copies and mail them early next week, I'm sure they'll arrive in time. Thanks so much for all of your help.
Student First Name [NS-]

Cost to Faculty. The second content category examines how the student acknowledges the cost of the request to the faculty.

Table 5: Distribution of Acknowledgements of Imposition by Rating

	NNS PAR	NNS NAR
Acknowledge	17.6%	9.1%
Minimize	5.8%	18.2%
No Acknowledge	0.0%	45.5%
Challenge	0.0%	4.5%
Neutral	76.5%	22.7%

	NS PAR	NS NAR
Acknowledge	20.0%	10.0%
Minimize	10.0%	10.0%
No Acknowledge	10.0%	20.0%
Challenge	0.0%	0.0%
Neutral	60.0%	60.0%

Table 5 shows that both NS and NNS PAR requests contain higher percentages of acknowledging the cost to the faculty than do the NAR requests: 17.6% of the PAR NNS requests acknowledge the cost compared to only 9.1% of the NAR requests. Twenty percent of the NS PAR requests acknowledge cost with only 10% of their NAR ones doing so. Acknowledgements include apologies for impingement and expressions of appreciation and gratitude. Examples (25) through (29) illustrate requests which acknowledge the imposition or cost to the faculty. In fact, PAR requests often include such acknowledgments even when low in imposition as in Example (29).

9

(25) …Would it be possible to write a letter for me on such short notice? and at the end of the semester? and before the holidays? I will be forever grateful. Student First Name [NS+]

(26) Subj: I hate to inconvenience you, but…
Faculty First Name,
After our meeting last week, I spent some time thinking about the dissertation year fellowship, and I decided to go ahead and apply. But then I ended up catching that flu that's been going around, so I didn't get a chance to talk with [faculty name] until today. Well, she thinks I should apply, and she'll be happy to write a letter of recommendation for me.
[Information here about institutional deadlines 3 days away]
So, I guess what I'm asking is if you could write another letter of recommendation for me this week (it would need to be submitted to the main office by late Thursday afternoon or early Friday morning).
I apologize for the short notice - I should have checked over the application materials more carefully before our meeting last week.
Thanks very much. You know I appreciate all your help.
[Student first name] [NS+]

(27) I am very sorry about bothering you at the end of the semester [NNS+, Japanese]

(28) I've just finished a pilot study lately and wondered if I could come over and talk to you about it, should it sound interesting to you, and should you have time for it. [NNS+, Taiwanese]

(29) Subj: House and Kasper article
Dear [faculty first name],
I'm looking for a copy of the House and Kasper (1981) article on politeness markers that you and Professor [faculty last name] cite in your 1993 article on Learning the Rules of Academic Talk. The library book which contains this article is checked out and already has one recall on it, meaning I won't be able to get my hands on it for another month.
Professor [last name] suggested I e-mail you as she seemed to recall that you had a copy of the article. If you do have a copy that you wouldn't mind lending for a short time, I would be very grateful. I could pick it up whenever is convenient for you. Thanks!
[student first + last name] [NS+]

In looking at the NAR requests, we find that students often do not acknowledge the cost at all. This is especially true of the NNS: 45.5% of such requests do not acknowledge the imposition. Example (30) illustrates such a message.

(30) Today I brought the last section of my thesis and placed it in your mailbox, in addition to a rough draft of my thesis for Prof Last Name in her mailbox. Please read it and give me your comments. [NNS-, Japanese]

10

One other strategy which also appears fairly often in the NAR requests include Underrating the imposition, as in Example (3) above, and Example (31).

(31) If you could print out 2 extra copies (see Example 24) [NS-]

It seems that in an institutional setting where a lower-status individual makes a request of a higher-status individual minimizing the request is a risky strategy. If the requester misjudges the actual level of imposition of the request, thus showing some lack of institutional knowledge, then a minimization strategy may backfire.

Explanation. The final Content category looks at the types of Explanations students offer for making their requests. Two categories emerged: institutionally-oriented and student-oriented Explanations. Table 6 shows that these categories tend to correspond with the evaluation of the requests.

Table 6: Distribution of Explanations

	NNS PAR	NNS NAR
Institutional	80.0%	26.9%
Me (Student)	20.0%	73.1%
Others	0.0%	0.0%
	NS PAR	NS NAR
Institutional	36.4%	18.1%
Me (Student)	45.5%	72.7%
Others	18.1%	9.2%

Of those PAR requests that offered Explanations, NNSs most often offered Institutional Reasons (NNS 80%), as in Example (29) discussed earlier. Example (32) shows a NS institutional reason.

(32) Subj: books
     Dr. [last name], I was wondering if you'd have any objections to letting me
     have the use of the books you put on reserve with [first name] over the
     Thanksgiving weekend. I just found out that the office will be close as of
     noon on Wed. Of course, I'd be willing to share them with anyone else who
     wants to use them this weekend..Thanks & have a great weekend.--- [NS+]

NS offered such reasons fairly often (36.4%), but used other explanations as well. The interesting pattern that emerges, however, is that for both NNS and NS NAR requests, student-centered Explanations occur at a rate of at least 70%. These student-oriented Explanations tend to focus on student needs and wants, and, as might be expected from the discussion on linguistic forms, employ a high number of "want" statements. Example (33) is a series of requests in one message, which offers an exceptionally high number of student-oriented explanations.

(33) Date: June 28 [N.B. summer break]
Subj: DRAFT
Hi, how are you? I have finished revising the thesis and will send it to you tomorrow by mail and it will reach you in your office in a week. I wish you can take some time for it and give a go-ahead sign for distributing it to other members. I will be returning to Bloomington on July 10th but have to go back to Japan by the first week of Sept. This is a big problem....
I understand that you all will be very busy because of class preparation, meetings, advising, etc. But isn't there any way that you can give me a chance to defend before the semester begins, that is before Aug. 30?...
By the way, do you think that I can meet you in July? I know that you do not want to meet any of your students during your vacation, but this will be my last chance to get my thesis done this year. If I can, I believe that I can finish my thesis and be ready for my defense. I hope you understand my situation and help me with it. [NNS-, Japanese]

NAR student-centered explanations frequently occur with high imposition requests which ask the faculty to make exceptions to institutional rules. Such rules may be general university regulations, or established practice on the part of the faculty member. In these cases, as contrasted with cases which do not have such requestive goals, the student does not have the same level of expectation that the faculty should comply with the request. In fact, the student may also not truly have the right to make such a request. As a result, the student may resort to positive politeness strategies which call for some empathy on the part of the faculty member, as in the last line of Example (33).

Finally, let us compare Examples (24) and (26), which contain equivalent request goals (high imposition, letters of recommendation) under similar circumstances (short time frame, student's fault). The PAR Example ((26) contains what Blum-Kulka, 1989, p. 62) claims is typically English: the accumulated effect of deferential politeness by using a number of downgraders. Furthermore, the student acknowledges responsibility and apologizes for inconvenience, but also cites institutional reasons for the time deadline itself. These, accompanied by expressions of appreciation, do not assume compliance on the part of the faculty member. In short, the student has included most of the strategies in this one request which we have noted as those likely to result in a PAR message. The student in Example (24), on the other hand, uses minimal negative politeness strategies: apart from an expression of gratitude, the request contains little that would signal that the recipient might not comply. In fact, she includes information that she has already taken steps which assume compliance (putting envelopes in the faculty member's mailbox). No explanation is offered for the nearness to the minimally expressed institutional timeline, no acknowledgement of the potential cost to the faculty member -- in fact, a minimization of the cost -- all contribute to the NAR status of the request.

CONCLUSION

We can see that there are a number of factors which interact to produce a positive or negative evaluation of students' requests by their faculty addressees. Given the status

12

difference and the institutional roles of the participants, the students are in the position of having to perform fact-threatening, potentially status noncongruent speech acts. They must be able to judge how much of an imposition any given request might be and determine a reasonable explanation for such a request. Since these are all institutional interactions, apparently an institutional explanation is more positively valued by the faculty than a noninstitutional one. Students must recognize the status of the faculty as institutional representatives, which also means that they must recognize that faculty have to meet many institutional demands, not just those of an individual student. Requests which do not employ sufficient mitigation or which fail to address that precarious balance of the faculty as institution vs the faculty as (over-worked) fellow humans risk negative evaluations. Student requestors who use personal needs and time frames remove some of the institutional nature of the request: they ask to be treated as exceptions to the institution. We find that when students do make such requests, they must also appeal to the faculty member as an individual, not just an institutional representative. Acknowledgement of the imposition, downgrading the request with mitigators, and generally allowing room for negotiation helps achieve this end.

To show that students can learn to become sensitive to these requirements, we would like to share with you Example (34),which is the text of a full message from a student received after the results of the research had been presented to one of our graduate classes.

(34)
    To: Prof Last Name
    Subj: Warning: the following is a high-imposition request (please read in good mood)
    Function: request
    subject: Student First Name (student)
    object: Prof Initials (professor)
    The internal process:
    Dear Professor,
    I demand that you write me a letter of recommendation for entry to the TESOL master's program by Friday. Thank you.
    (Hmm... seems a little strong)

    Take 2:
    Esteemed Professor Initials,
    I would like to request the honor of your writing me a letter of recommendation for entry to the TESOL master's program at your earliest convenience. Thank you very much.
    (Yes, much more polite, but a little formal)

    Take 3:
    Dear Nickname,
    Congratulations! I am happy to inform you that you have been selected to write me a letter of recommendation next week! Have a great time and enjoy!
    (Good, but maybe overly cheerful)

13

Take 4:
Dear Professor Initials,
I regret to inform you that you have been chosen to write me a letter of recommendation...
(definitely not-- too depressive)

Take 5:
Dear Professor,
I am so sorry to impose the onorous task of asking you to write a letter of recommendation for me. I know I am unworthy and do not deserve this, but would you please consider overlooking my defects and undertaking this burden? I will do anything you want in repayment. Thank you so much.
(come on Student First Name, have a little DIGNITY!)

Take 6:
Dear First Name,
Sometimes knowing the right pragmatic approach is difficult even for NSs! What I am trying to ask you is if you would consider writing me a letter of recommendation for entry into the TESOL master's program. The job market is competitive. I think I'm well-trained in language pedagogy and would like to be able to apply for jobs in French, English and Spanish. The masters in TESOL will verify my qualifications for teaching English, for those who need it...
As far as my application to the TESOL program goes, I don't need a letter immediately. I would just like to be accepted sometime before I leave IU (plus or minus ten years from now, when I have my dissertation finished). I will not be asking for an assistantship in the linguistics department right now, in case that's relevant. Thank you for your consideration. I know letters of recommendation are a pain in the butt--I detest writing them myself. But I will be eternally grateful if you would be willing to do it for me. Thanks again.
Student First Name

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NOTES

[1]It should be noted, however, that most of the requests were, in fact, granted, in spite of the affective response on the part of the recipient.

[2]"-" = NAR message; "+" = PAR message

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15

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